No. 31. The duty of proving and holding fast the faith of the Gospel.

1st Theſſalonians, 5th Chap. 21ſt Verſe.

Prove all things, hold faſt that which is good.

In this chapter St. Paul gives the Theſſalonians some excellent precepts, as so many sure and infallible rules by which they were to walk; rules they might follow with the greateſt safety; because both in what he preached and wrote to them, he was endued with and aſsiſted by the spirit of God. But inaſmuch as he was then abſent from them, as he was to preach the kingdom of God to other Churches alſo, and not always to abide in the fleſh, he gives them a command and direction how to avoid any ſpiritual loſs from what other teachers that were to come after him should say. He had laid the foundation, but others, liable to ignorance and error, were to build thereupon. And not only so, but he was chiefly to guard them againſt any danger from "falſe teachers, thoſe grievous wolves that "might enter in among them, and would, by their "cunning craftineſs, lie in wait to deceive them, by "corrupting the word of God." The rule or precept

he enjoins them, is, the great virtue of discretion, and he enforces it with another equally essential, that of constancy or perseverance. These are two special properties required in every one that desires to be a skilful and faithful preserver of his soul, treasuring up in his mind the true word of God unto salvation. They had need of discretion to try the doctrines that are taught them; of constancy to retain and practise such as upon diligent trial and search, shall be found good and wholesome. Doctrines taken upon trust may, like gold without a scale or touchstone, prove light or counterfeit not worth being treasured up. Try therefore first, and what upon proof you find to have full weight and to be true, keep with all possible diligence and safety. To try those things which we hear, exactly, and to hold constantly, what upon trial we find good, is the wisdom and discretion of a Christian. Prove all, &c.

The things to be proved are here laid down in general terms; and general terms without due restrictions and limitations, are easily and often mistaken.

Our Bleſsed Saviour commands us "not to swear at "all"—but He cannot be underſtood to forbid giving teſtimony upon oath before a Magiſtrate, himſelf having anſwered upon oath when adjured by Pilate. He forbids only falſe oaths and raſh swearing in common converſation. So here, in the text, the general phraſe "all things" muſt be reſtrained to the things spoken of before. The Apoſtle, in the preceding verſe, commands the Theſsalonians "not to deſpiſe prophecyings;" by which he meant preaching or interpreting and applying of the Scriptures. But in order to prevent their being miſled, he charges them to prove what was taught them; which was indiſpenſably neceſsary leſt they should reject the truth without trial or fair examination. For truth will always be the same by whomſoever it is spoken, be his speech never so contemptible, and his perſon never so weak and mean. All doctrines therefore that are preſsed upon the conſcience to be believed and practiſed, by whomſoever they are inculcated, if there be the leaſt doubt whether they are according to

truth and godliness, must be thoroughly examined and impartially investigated. Nothing is to be admitted as a truth necessary to salvation, unless it be grounded upon the express testimony of God's word, or at least, by necessary consequence, is to be deduced from it.

If it be enquired who are they that are to prove these doctrines? Let me observe, that to examine, by the word of God, the doctrines that are taught, is enjoined as well to the people who hear, as the ministers who preach them. For to whom does the Apostle write this Epistle? Not to the Pastors only, but to the whole Church of the Thessalonians. (1st Chap. 1st Verse) To whom does he enjoin this precept, but to those whom he beseeches "to know them which labor among them in "the Lord and admonish them?" These very people of Thessalonica, when "St. Paul reasoned with them out "of the Scriptures, opening and alledging to them the "necessity of Christ's sufferings," are censured for their neglect of this most important duty. And therefore the Scripture acquaints us that "the Bereans were

"more noble than those of Thessalonica, in that they "received the word with all readiness of mind, and "searched the scriptures daily whether those things were "so." This temper of the Bereans is there recommended to the imitation of all true Christians; and here in the text the Thessalonians, and in them all that embrace Christianity, that have sufficient ability, are called upon to put it in practise. It is a duty that concerns all in the church who have discretion and capacity to do it, and who, being as the Apostle expresses it, "of full age, by reason of use have their "senses exercised to discern both good and evil."

That it is necessary for Christians to try and examine the doctrines that are taught them, may appear by the many cautions and commands given us in Scripture to do so. Our Blessed Saviour gave His disciples in charge "to take heed and beware of "the Leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees," that is, as He himself explained it, "to beware of their "doctrines." And we are admonished by St. John

" not to believe every spirit, but to try the spirits whe-
" ther they be of God." For this caution there is in-
deed abundant reason, because the ministers and preach-
ers of God's word, be they never so learned, religious,
and sincere, are but men subject to errors and in-
firmities. It was the privilege of Moses and the
Prophets, the Apostles and Evangelists, to be infallibly
directed by the Spirit, that they might deliver for the
use of the Church those truths without any mixture of
error, which were to be the rule of faith, and a good
life to after ages. Those that have followed them in
the work of the ministry, however venerable for their
learning or graces, yet have been subject to mistakes,
" having this treasure in earthen vessels." Besides,
there have always been, and will ever be in the Church,
God in His wisdom so permitting it, " that they which
" are approved may be made manifest" — malicious
broachers of false doctrines, " perverse men speaking per-
" verse things, beguiling serpents, such as by their
" subtilty, corrupt men's minds from the simplicity

"that is in Christ." Jeremiah tells us of false pro-
phets "that spake the visions of their own hearts"—
Micah of others "walking in the spirit of falshood and
"prophecying lies." St. Paul complains of "false
"apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves
"into the Apostles of Christ." Since then, through the
ignorance of some and the malice of other teachers, many
errors may creep into the Church, we see how great
danger our souls may be in should we admit all doc-
trines without trial, like the simple man described by
Solomon, "believing every thing that shall be taught
"us."

I now proceed to shew the rule by which we are
to prove the doctrines whether they be of God.

Now for the trial of all doctrines that concern
faith and holiness of life, no other rule can be ascer-
tained but the infallible word of God. All that agrees
with this must be received, and all that disagrees with
it rejected. This rule Isaiah propounded to the Jewish
Church to discern false teachers from true, and says,

recourſe muſt be had "to the law and to the teſtimony," and if they ſpeak not according to this word, it is "becauſe there is no light in them." Hither alſo it is that Chriſt himſelf has ſent us—"ſearch the ſcrip-"tures, for they are they which teſtify of me." And St. Paul's rule for prophecying or preaching is, that it be "according to the proportion of faith." The Apoſtle, in an Epiſtle to Timothy, deſcribes the Scriptures "as able to make him wiſe unto ſalvation—that all "Scripture is given by inſpiration of God," and that its tendency is to "make us perfect, thoroughly furniſhed "unto all good works." We may likewiſe be aſſured that there is no other rule than this, becauſe "the things "of God knoweth no man but the Spirit of God." To what is objected as to its obſcurity, we muſt grant there is ſome difficulty and obſcurity in it, "ſome things," as is there expreſſed, "hard to be underſtood." But all neceſſary truths are plainly and clearly revealed therein.

Regard is here to be had to the ability Chriſtians

may have to prove the doctrines they hear by this rule of the Scriptures.

In order to which it is necessary that the Scriptures be read with an honest and sincere desire of knowing the truth, without prejudice or partiality, not with any the least design to reject one article of faith because it does not correspond with some preconceived notion of our own—nor again with a purpose to perswade ourselves such or such a sin is lawful because it coincides with our corrupt inclinations. A small turn of the hand will make the balance go down either way, but then we are ignorant still of the just weight of the thing we are trying to know. We must therefore allow the Scriptures to speak fairly for themselves, and [without evident reason to the contrary] take them in their plain, genuine, and common received acceptation, without straining the sense and misapplying the words. For they that do so do but pervert the meaning and wrest the sense of the Scriptures to their own destruction. But a conscientious endeavor to believe the truth for its own

sake, and to render our practice and conversation such as becomes the Gospel of Christ will help to prevent all this, and be a further means to enable us to judge aright. The Psalmist tells us that "the secret of the "Lord is with them that fear Him, and He will "shew them His covenant." And our Blessed Saviour assures us that "if any man will do God's will, "he shall know of the doctrine whether it be of God."

I come now to the last part of the Text, that after a thorough and fair trial we should hold fast that which is good.

As it is a chief point of christian prudence to try and prove before we embrace any doctrine, so 'tis no less a point of christian constancy to retain and hold fast those which upon proof and trial we find agreeable to the Scriptures. To be too peremptory in our opinions before we see any sufficient grounds and reasons for them, is rather obstinacy proceeding from self-will, than constancy flowing from sound judgment. We are therefore to observe the order prescribed in the text, first to

prove the truth of the doctrine, and then heartily to embrace it. No sooner, alas! is the seed of the word sown in men's hearts, but either the crafty insinuations of the Devil are ready to catch it away; or thorns, the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches, to spring up and choke it: few are those minds in which it takes deep root and continues to maturity. The Israelites received the law from Mount Sinai with thunders, lightnings, and the sound of a trumpet, and yet when these terrors were over, when Moses was detained from them so long that they thought they should see him no more, they fell in a little time into downright idolatry, made themselves a molten calf and proclaimed before it, "these are thy gods O Israel." St. Paul had no small trouble—for he calls it travailing in birth—to form the Galatians to the Gospel of Christ. And yet he complains that "they were soon removed "from his unto another Gospel." These reasons and examples being duly considered, let me exhort you in the Apostles words—"take heed, brethren, lest there be in

"any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing "from the living God." For we shall have no part in Christ if we hold not the beginning of our confidence stedfast unto the end. In order to this we must be careful to avoid the hearing and the company of false teachers, that lay snares for our souls, and seek to turn us back from the sincerity of the Gospel. The Apostle is earnest in advising us to this caution— "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which "cause divisions and offences among you contrary to "the doctrine ye have learned, and avoid them." We must also take heed that we always keep a good conscience, for if that be once corrupted, the affections will quickly be perverted, and in the end the very judgment will be blinded, and the mind itself become reprobate.

Let me then exhort you, my Brethren, as ye regard the salvation of your souls, not to be like babes in understanding, "carried about with every wind of "doctrine"—but as ye value immortal happiness be prevailed on to try the doctrines that are taught you—

ground not your faith upon men's words, but prove the truth of them by the Scriptures, and when you have received the truth depart not from it. Hold it fast in your judgments, in your affections, in your practice. "Hold fast the profession of your faith without "wavering, and you will find Him faithful that "hath promised. Be ye faithful unto death, and He "will give you a crown of life."

That we may have understanding to prove and resolution to hold fast the truth, let us offer up our prayers to Him from whom "cometh every good gift."

'Almighty God, heavenly Father, we thy un-'worthy servants prostrate ourselves before thy Throne, 'humbly beseeching Thee to enlighten our darkened 'understandings, to purify our corrupted souls, to 'cleanse our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy 'Spirit, that we may be enabled to comprehend and 'receive the truth of the ever-blessed Gospel. May the 'Truth as it is in Jesus be the object of our search 'and the end of our examination. And after we

'have found it endow us with resolution to hold it fast,
'and with courage to preserve it. Let it not be wrested
'from us either by the insinuations of men or the wiles
'of Satan. Without thy special Grace we know we
'are perpetually subject to error; we commit ourselves
'therefore entirely to Thee, our conduct to thy command,
'our understanding to Thy Illumination. We are
'not without awful apprehensions that we shall receive
'the Grace of God in vain; clothe us then with the
'breast-plate of righteousness, and put upon us the ar-
'mour of salvation, and enable us in our christian
'warfare, to fight the good fight of faith, that we may
'be received through the merits of Jesus Christ, into those
heavenly mansions which Thou hast prepared for all
"who regulate their lives by the precepts of the Gospel!"

Theoph^{s}. J. St. John.

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